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Latin America Review

31 August 1979

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Chile: Human Rights Case [redacted] 3.5(c)

The death of a Chilean professor following his interrogation by the state security agency, CNI, successor to the notorious DINA, has prompted both the Chilean courts and the Interior Minister to order official investigations. The incident, the most serious human rights violation this year, severely damages Chile's efforts to improve its human rights record and further blackens the reputation of the security agency, whose involvement in the Letelier assassination is currently under review by the Chilean Supreme Court.

Renato Alvarez, a suspected member of the extremist Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), died on 21 August, six days after he was arrested by carabineros (national police) while trying to set an incendiary device. He was turned over to the CNI, which held him incommunicado until rushing him to a hospital just before his death. Habeas corpus petitions filed by family members on 16 August had failed to prod the courts into a prompt, assertive investigation, despite the illegal nature of Alvarez's arrest and his obviously poor physical condition at his arraignment on 20 August. Only after his death did the courts appoint a special investigation judge for the case, while Interior Minister Fernandez initiated an internal investigation; the CNI responded by denying Alvarez was tortured and claimed he was received "in damaged condition," probably owing to his struggle with carabineros at the time of his detention.

Chile has made real progress in correcting human rights abuses during the past two years, and the Alvarez case, which was immediately highlighted in the press, is a serious blow to the government's image. The timing is also particularly bad for the CNI. The case comes on the eve of the Chilean Supreme Court's ruling on the US extradition request for former DINA chief Contreras in connection with DINA's involvement

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with the Letelier assassination; it also follows Argentina's recent low-key reopening of its investigation of possible DINA involvement in the 1974 assassination of Chilean ex-General Prats in Argentina. The Alvarez case could be the spark that finally compels the Chilean Government--or, at least, the Chilean courts--to take steps to curb the excesses of security forces.

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